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ABSTRACT

This study attempted to decipher what happens to African American students during their sophomore year to make them disenchanted with their academic experience in their subsequent years and tested whether a supportive mentoring relationship can be developed over the telephone. Fulltime African American students (N=27) entering their second year with a cumulative grade point average between 1.5 and 1.9 inclusive participated in the study. Each was contacted by telephone four times during the year by an African American member of the Counseling Center staff. At each call, students were asked to discuss concerns or issues with which the caller might be able to help. Callers completed a record sheet after each call on which they indicated the content of the call, the attitude of the students, and any action plan. Most of the issues mentioned by students during their telephone calls were issues for which there were resources on campus. While rates of academic persistence and persistence in good standing did not differ significantly between the treatment group and nontreatment control group (N=30) in each of the four semesters subsequent to the initial semester of intervention, the treatment group showed higher retention and better academic standing than did the control group. The results, although not statistically significant, confirmed the feasibility of establishing a supportive mentoring relationship by phone. (ABL)

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UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND

College Park, Maryland

Intrusive Informing: Mentoring by Telephone

A Pilot Study

Research Report # 11-90

The Counseling Center Retention Study Group

Vivian Boyd, Patricia Hunt, Stanley Hunt,
Thomas Magoon, Bekele Molla, John Van Brunt

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Computer time for this project has been provided in full through the Computer Science Center of the University of Maryland at College Park.

Intrusive Informing: Mentoring by Telephone

A Pilot Study

The Counseling Center Retention Study Group*

Research Report # 11-90

There were two purposes to the pilot study reported here: to attempt to decipher what happens to African American students during their sophomore year to make them disenchanted with their academic experience in their subsequent years; and to test whether a supportive mentoring relationship can be developed over the telephone.

Twenty-seven fulltime African American students entering their second year with a cumulative grade point average between 1.5 and 1.9 inclusive participated in the study. Each was contacted by phone four times during the year by an African American member of the Counseling Center staff. At the initial call, students were told that their caller has been able to help African American students become better acquainted with University red tape and therefore become better able to handle frustrations which can arise from dealing with the system. At each call, students were asked to discuss concerns or issues the caller might be able to help them with. Callers completed a record sheet after each call on which they indicated the content of the call, the attitude of the students, and any action plan decided on. These record sheets helped provide continuity across calls.

Most of the issues mentioned by students during their phonecalls were issues for which there are resources on campus. Callers were able to refer their students to these resources. While examination of the rates of academic persistence and persistence in good standing did not differ significantly between the treatment group and a nontreatment control group in each of the four semesters subsequent to the initial semester of intervention, the treatment group showed higher retention and better academic standing than did the control group.

The results of the pilot study, although not statistically significant, were encouraging, confirming the feasibility of establishing a supportive mentoring relationship by phone.

* Vivian Boyd, Patricia Hunt , Stanley Hunt, Thomas Magoon, Bekele Molla, John Van Brunt

Mentoring by Telephone

A Pilot Study

The Counseling Center Retention Study Group*

African American matriculants at The University of Maryland at College Park in the fall of 1987 were the focus of a great deal of (mandatory) attention/advising during their freshman year. However, after the freshman year there has been a decrement of University-initiated supportive attention given to African American students. While short-term contact, such as advising appointments, is critical to a successful first year, longer term multi-contact interventions are needed to create a truly supportive environment. There seems to be a decathexis or withdrawal of academic energy on the part of many African American students on predominantly white campuses over time, as reported by Jacqueline Fleming (1984) and the Maryland Longitudinal Study (Fall 1988), among others. These studies suggest that despite the ability of these students to earn and maintain a grade point average high enough to be retained at and graduate from college, they appear not to benefit fully from the educational opportunities afforded them by admission to college.

The purpose of the present intervention was to test whether a supportive mentoring relationship can be developed over the telephone. Further, it was an attempt to decipher if something

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happens to African American students during the sophomore year to make them disenchanted with their academic experience in their junior and senior years.

METHOD

The target group was fulltime African American sophomores who entered the fall 1988 semester at UMCP with a cumulative grade point average between 1.5 and 1.9 inclusive. These students were in academic jeopardy and therefore were at risk of being dismissed from the University at the end of the semester if they were not able to improve their grades. It was considered crucial, therefore, that these students continue to receive supportive encouragement from the University support staff.

One hundred five (105) names were randomly selected from a listing of African American sophomores attempting 12 or more credits, whose end of freshman year cumulative grade point average was between 1.5 and 1.9 inclusive. Of these, 9 were excluded for not having a listed local address, and 2 for not having a listed local phone number. Thirty names were randomly selected to comprise a nontreatment control group. An introductory letter with return postcard to indicate interest in being called was sent to the remaining 64 students, in late September. Students phoned beginning in early October, by five African American staff at the Counseling Center. (1)

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(1) Dr. Vivian Boyd, Ms. Sharon Kirkland, Ms. Rhonda Jeter, Dr. Bekele Molla, Dr. Yvonne Oslin

A total of 27 students were successfully contacted by phone in October. During the initial phonecall, the purpose of the intervention was described fully. Students were told that it has been the experience of African American staff at the Counseling Center that they have been able to help African American students handle the University's red tape and the frustration which can arise from learning the system, and in so doing, have helped students stay in school. Students were asked to discuss concerns or issues that the caller might help them with. At the end of the phonecall they were told that they would be called three more times during the academic year, and that the student should feel free to get in touch with the caller when needed.

A total of four calls to each participating student were attempted:

1. early October
2. after midterms in the fall
3. early February
4. prior to pre-registration in the spring semester

Callers completed a record sheet after each call on which they indicated the content of the call, the attitude of the student, and any action plan decided on.

Outcome Variables

Two outcome variables were studied to determine the effect of the intervention on students' retention rates:

1) academic retention, defined as enrolled for a given semester;

2) academic retention in good standing, defined as enrolled for a given semester and with no academic action taken as a result of the previous semester.

All data concerning registration status and academic performance were obtained from University records. Data were analyzed for four semesters subsequent to the initial semester of intervention.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the retention rates of the treatment and control groups.

Table 1

Academic Retention Rates by Group

	Group			
	Treatment		Control	
initial n	27		30	
Semester	n	%	n	%
S '89	21	78	21	70
F '89	20	74	20	67
S '90	20	74	18	60
F '90	17	63	13	43

Table 2 shows the rates of retention in good standing for the two groups.

Table 2

Rates of Academic Retention in Good Standing by Group

	Group			
	Treatment		Control	
initial n	27		30	
Semester	n	%	n	%
S '89	14	52	15	50
F '89	18	67	14	47
S '90	18	67	17	57
F '90	14	52	11	37

The differences between the treatment and control groups were not significantly difference (at the .05 level using the chi square statistic) for either retention or retention in good standing. However, in every semester the treatment group showed higher retention and better academic standing than did the control group.

DISCUSSION

For four semesters, the students involved in the telephone mentoring project had higher retention rates than did the non-treatment controls. While the differences were not statistically significant, using the chi square statistic, it is institutionally significant that just under two-thirds (63%) of the mentored students were still enrolled at UMCP two years after the intervention, while this was true of under half (43%) of the nontreatment students.

Further, for three of the four semesters under study, mentored students persisted in good academic standing in greater

proportions than did the nontreatment students, although again, the differences were not statistically significant using the chi square statistic. Two years after the intervention, just over half (52%) of the mentored students were enrolled in good academic standing, while this was true for just over one-third (37%) of the nontreatment controls.

Among the issues mentioned by students during their phone conversations were the combined pressures of a heavy course load and employment; concern about selecting a major and career; a schedule which leaves no time for fun; test anxiety; not being "the type" to seek help; dissatisfaction with grades; and the sense that "help doesn't feel like help." These are all issues for which there are resources on campus designed to help students confront. Telephone mentors were able to guide students toward the relevant resources as well as emphatically hear them out concerning their distress.

The results of the pilot study were encouraging, confirming as they do, the feasibility of establishing a supportive mentoring relationship by phone. The pilot suggests that a replication of the intervention on a large scale would contribute to the University's goals of enhancing the undergraduate experience - beyond the freshman year - and increasing the retention rates of its African American students.

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